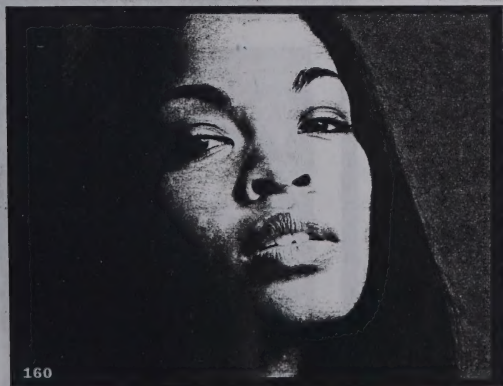




Black and White Wo



What Still Divides





men:



Us



Why, thirty years after we marched together to live together, are our lives so profoundly separate? An LHH/*Essence* magazine roundtable sets the stage for understanding. A special report by Audrey Edwards

"What's the first thing you think of when I say 'White women'?"

"Intelligent."

"Manipulative."

"Privileged."

"And what's the first thing you think of when I say 'Black women'?"

"Strong."

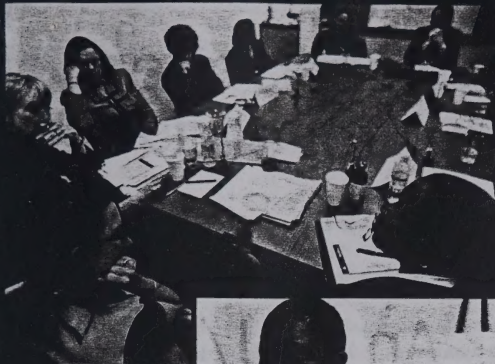
"Determined."

"Attitude."

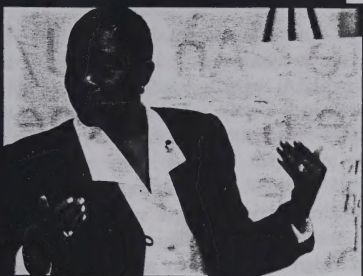
We're not usually asked such pointed questions, but we do certainly harbor perceptions, opinions and unconscious attitudes that get to the heart of how Blacks and Whites see each other. When *Essence* and *Ladies' Home Journal* magazines convened a roundtable discussion on race last fall to assess some of the issues that still divide Black and White women, tough questions were asked—and the perceptions were startling.

Why, after a defining civil rights movement in the sixties, a move to liberate women in the seventies and the push for affirmative action and diversity programs in the eighties, does race remain such a major issue? What emerged during the roundtable, as participants responded to a number of scenarios about race developed by the moderator, is that much of what troubles relationships between races in the nineties has to do with how each perceives not only its own experience, but also the experiences of the other. The views sometimes overlap, but they are never in total sync. The White women gathered, for instance, said they see Black women as strong, assertive and confident—and that's a strength. Black women said they see themselves as strong, assertive and vulnerable—and that's a burden. Black women saw White women as privileged, in control and protected—and that's an asset. White women saw themselves as privileged, guilty and uncertain—and that's unsettling.

Though we have all been shaped and sometimes even warped by race, how we see and interact with one another is a function not just of race but (continued)



"None of us is born a racist," Dr. Greer Wilson (right) assures a roundtable comprised of three African-American and three White women, joined here by editors from *Essence* magazine and the *Journal*, along with the writer. The group met at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, to work on bridging the gap between Black and White



Black we accept that

Mims Breckenridge Harris, fifty-seven, a native of Twin Falls, Idaho, who is director of campus activities at Colorado State University, in Fort Collins.

The group convened in the University of Pennsylvania's School of Nursing, in Philadelphia, for an all-day session that was at times raucous, at times painful, but always provocative. Conversations ranged from frank assessments of how we get along at work (the place Black and White women have the most interaction) to revealing admissions about power and privilege, fear and anger. Whether it is an informal meeting between Black and White women or a national initiative on race like the one called for by President Clinton, talking about race has never been easy. But only through open, honest dialogue will Blacks and Whites begin the tough process of getting to know each other. That's where racial healing and understanding start.

POWER AND PRIVILEGE

For the Black women convened, Whites can't begin to understand people of other races until they accept that they automatically have privilege and power in American society by virtue of simply being White. The resulting sense of entitlement informs all their perceptions, from the major to the mundane. Take the following scenario outlined by Greer Wilson: "At a workplace retreat, White women arrive in jeans and T-shirts and the African-American women arrive in skirts. One of the White women asks a Black woman why the African-American women are so 'dressed up.'"

"What's going on here?" Dr. Wilson asks. Laurel Touby, the White journalist, takes a guess: "Black women always dress up for regular functions because they want to be taken seriously?" Not quite, Wilson says. What's more to the point is that Whites as the majority race set the standards—consciously or unconsciously—and whenever they think Blacks are deviating, whether it's "dressing up" at a retreat or wearing their hair in cornrows, they often say and do things that make Blacks feel wrong when there really is no question of right and wrong.

"There was this petite White woman who came into the office one day wearing tight pants, and nobody said anything to her about the way she was dressed," recounts Sandra Naves, the Black grievance coordinator at a state

(continued) of age, gender, class and upbringing as well. "One of the things we know is that none of us is born a racist," says roundtable moderator Greer Dawson Wilson, Ed.D., a Black woman head of Greer & Co., a diversity consulting and training firm in Charlottesville, Virginia. "But based on where we come from, who our parents were, where we live, what kind of jobs we have, what kind of friends we have, all of those things end up being a value system that influences our racial attitudes."

Joining Dr. Wilson in the roundtable were six participants, three Black and three White. The Black participants were Terri Heard, twenty-nine, a Philadelphia writer for a national weekly magazine; Sandra Naves, thirty-four, from Grand Rapids, Michigan, a grievance coordinator at the Muskegon Correctional Facility, and Pynke (pronounced Pinky) Gohaner-Lyles, forty-eight, deputy director of the Monticello Area Community Action Agency, in Charlottesville, Virginia.

White participants included Laurel Touby, thirty-five, a freelance writer raised in Miami and now living in New York City; Debra Abbott, forty-six, originally from Long Island, New York, who runs the youth programs at the Monticello Area Community Action Agency in Charlottesville, and works for Pynke Gohaner-Lyles; and

White women resent the implication a simple question could make them

Whites can't understand until they power simply because they are White

prison in Michigan. "And then another day a Black female came in wearing a skort set with a jacket and silk blouse and somebody made a comment about her being dressed up."

Obviously, much confusion, misunderstanding and resentment surround Black and White perceptions of each other on even the most mundane things. African-Americans have their own standards for what's appropriate when it comes to dress, hairstyles and other aspects of their culture, and resent it when they feel they have to continually explain these standards to Whites. Yet Whites, who often have genuine and innocent curiosity about Black culture, resent the implication that asking a simple question could make them racist. Who's right? Is anybody wrong?

The real question to Whites might be: Why do you feel the need to ask the question in the first place? And to Blacks: Why do you feel offended by the question? If you as a White woman are asking because a Black woman dressed differently rattles your notion of what's appropriate, where does that notion come from? Is that the only valid view? If you as a Black woman are offended by the question, what's the nature of the offense? That Whites still know so little about you? That you feel you're being held to standards not your own? Or are you so sensitive to racial slights that even an innocuous question can be misunderstood as racist?

The truth is, says Debra Abbott, the youth director at a human services agency in Charlottesville, Virginia, who is White and considers herself "a recovering racist," one of the hallmarks of White power and privilege is that "Whites don't really have to think about race at all." And a defining feature of the discrimination and oppression experienced by Blacks is that race can become almost all they think about when dealing with Whites. Such divergent points of view are bound to lead to conflict.

Pynke Gohaner-Lyles, deputy director of the community action agency where Abbott works, equates White power with the White need to control—to be superior. Even though she runs an agency of about a hundred people, she says, "I can be in a meeting where I'm the only woman of color in the room out of, say, fifteen Caucasian women. And if I or any

other woman of color has an opinion, they may pretend to listen to it, but then it goes right out the window. I think a lot of White women really believe that we don't know what we're talking about—that we don't have the basis for talking."

As insulting as such White dismissiveness might be, Black women say, it is the unconscious, visceral reactions of Whites to Blacks that can be the most damaging. Terri Heard, an African-American who commutes by train from Philadelphia to the suburbs, told this disturbing story about her daily ride: "You get the corporate lawyers and business types on this line, and the train can get crowded—even packed—and no White person will sit next to me until they absolutely have to. I get the feeling no one is sitting next to me because I'm Black." Whites often don't get it; they don't acknowledge—or they don't care about—the debilitating psychological effects such actions have on Blacks. "There's a lot of shame and guilt involved with White people when it comes to race," says Abbott. "They don't want to own up to things like privilege and power or racist behavior. They feel, 'I did the civil rights thing—I marched in the sixties. We took (continued on page 214)"

What Black and White Women Want

When we analyzed the responses of Black and White women to LHM's American Woman Survey, a comprehensive look at women's lives today, we found a remarkable similarity. Both Black and White women are generally satisfied with their lives—though Black women's satisfaction comes from their extended families and their appearance, while White women's comes from their careers, finances, friends and spouses. Having children was equally rewarding for both groups, who also agreed that they need more sleep and more help from their husbands on housework and child care. Where do they differ? Black women are more upset about male/female inequality: Sixty-three percent (as opposed to 42 percent of White women) feel men have more sexual freedom than women do, and 59 percent (versus 46 percent of White women) feel men have more freedom in general. And when it comes to what we wish for, a much larger percentage of Black women than White named more money (79 versus 60), more time for themselves (70 versus 56), a better career (79 versus 51), marriage (47 versus 21) and more time for volunteer work (64 versus 51). The one thing White women wish for more than do Black women: to be thin (53 versus 39).

that asking
appear racist

THE JUDDS

Continued

Ashley is particularly touchy about discussing her love life—which, admittedly, has been tabloid fodder for the last couple of years. When asked whom she's dating, Ashley replies with a tony, almost indecipherable foreign word that, roughly translated, means, "Back off, bub." (Strickland later confirms that she and Bolton are seeing each other again.)

"She relishes being able to say that to you," says Wynonna. "I want to teach people through my mistakes as well as my successes. I'm willing to say, 'Unfortunately, that guy I dated was a loser.' Ashley's not as willing to say that. And see, she wants to be famous when she's working on a movie and wants to have her own life when she's not. She hasn't accepted yet that she can't have it both ways."

Ashley glares at her sister, then laughs. "I guess I'm afraid of not being dignified," she says quietly.

Certainly, Ashley is seeking dignity

in her work. An avid reader, she is not on the prowl for more blockbuster movies. She'll next be appearing as the mother in *A Small Miracle*, an adaptation of the novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving, about a diminutive child who believes God has a special gift for him. She is loath to compare herself to anyone, but the actresses she admires are those known more for the quality of their craft than their bankability: Vanessa Redgrave, Jessica Lange, Judy Davis, Joan Allen.

As for Wynonna and Naomi, it's taken much trial and error to learn to get along, but now when there's irritation between them, it just slides right by. There is even some talk of the two of them singing together again—depending on Naomi's health. After a grueling course of treatment with interferon, a protein that inhibits the virus's ability to replicate, Naomi's hepatitis has gone into remission. For most hepatitis sufferers, such a remission is temporary; for a small percentage,

though, it becomes permanent. "Even though they're saying this is a no-win disease, I'm going for the cure," Naomi says.

After hanging out with this battling and loving family, one can't help wondering: What will Wynonna tell her own children about getting along with each other? "Hah! Paybacks are hell!" Wy snorts. "Maybe I'm going to be paid back with my kids for all the fighting me and Ashley did. But I guess you just have to pray a lot, and try to instill kindness and generosity by example. It's like, Ashley watches me, I watch her and we both watch our mother for life lessons. And it's the same with my kids. They're going to watch me a lot more than they're going to listen."

But Wynonna is shrewd enough not to be too much of a Pollyanna. As she likes to say about her family, "We put the *fun* in dysfunctional." ●

Judith Newman, who is a contributing editor for Mademoiselle and Allure, also writes for The New York Times.

BLACK AND WHITE WOMEN

Continued from page 163

care of all that. Why do you keep bringing this [racism] up?"

FEAR AND ANGER

While the civil rights era saw major changes, "we stopped working on it," Abbott believes. Clinton's call for national "conversations" on race, the bitter court fights over busing and affirmative action, chilling incidents of police brutality against Blacks, and the ongoing cases of racial bias throughout the country all speak to America's persistent difficulty in solving its race problem. Even the briefest of encounters between the two races can be cause for alarm and tension, as this scenario reveals: "Sharon, a White female, and Brenda, a Black female, are walking down the street talking. Four African-American teenage boys approach from the opposite direction and Sharon freezes."

"All right, I admit that's a racist

response," says Laurel Touby, the White journalist. "But truthfully, if I see four Black kids together, I'm more scared immediately, with no reason, than I am if I see four White kids." These kinds of reflex, gut fears of Blacks by Whites, are particularly galling to Blacks. And it's not just teenage Black boys who elicit such fears. More and more Black women complain about being followed in department stores as if they were going to shoplift, or about being refused entry at all—as happened to Oprah Winfrey. Apparently unrecognized, Winfrey was denied entrance when she rang the buzzer of a posh New York boutique. The news media often fuel these fears with its negative portrayals of African-Americans.

"I know tons of crime is done by Whites," Touby says, "and I know plenty of White people are on welfare, but in my experience and from what I see in the media, the more aggressive men are Black." In fact,

in Touby's experience, the more aggressive people have been Black. Growing up in Miami, where she went to a predominantly Black junior high school, Touby has vivid memories of Charmaine, the Black girl who became her nemesis, often threatening her physically and verbally at school. "I can still see her long, lacquered fingernail on my nose and hear her saying, 'Hit it off, bitch. C'mon. Hit it off.'"

Yet Touby's fears, like those of many other Whites, are grounded in something much deeper than memories of a childhood bully: "There is always the assumption that you're going to be hated by Blacks," she says. "And I don't have the language to talk Blacks out of their rage if they threaten me."

There it is. White fear of Black anger. Vague, free-floating, but always palpable, rising to the surface in the most ordinary of encounters between Blacks and Whites. It doesn't help that after *(continued)*

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BLACK AND WHITE WOMEN

Continued

four centuries, Whites and Blacks still don't know each other very well. Indeed, in some areas of the country, Whites don't come in contact with any Blacks at all. Mims Harris, for instance, who grew up in a small town in Idaho that had a population of 20,000, with one Black family, didn't meet an African-American until she was a graduate student.

She admits that she is occasionally afraid to be honest in her dealings with Blacks. "Sometimes I'm so afraid I'm going to say or do the wrong thing that I might not challenge something a Black person says that I don't agree with." There is the fear of being labeled racist, but for many Whites there is also an anger that comes with that fear. Blacks tend to filter everything through a racial lens, Whites complain, when the truth is that every comment, question or disagreement from a White person is not racially

motivated, and certainly not racist.

A large part of the difference in perception has to do with style: Black women are often more vocal and more expressive in language and gesture. Whether it's making a statement with hands on hips or pointing a finger for emphasis, their manner can be intimidating to a White woman whose culture encourages more understated behavior.

Harris doesn't think Blacks overstate the race issue. "In general, when I hear Black people say something was racist, it probably was," she says. "But that's hard for Whites to hear. I finally got it when I understood the privilege issue. What it means to be White is that I never have to think about being White. But every day a Black person has race in his or her face."

HOW RACE COLORS EVERYTHING

What has constantly having to confront race done to the sensibility of

African-Americans? One of the most debilitating legacies of slavery is that race dominates almost every area—even the most intimate—of Blacks' lives. Take a look at this scenario: "An African-American woman is downtown and sees an interracial couple—a White woman with a Black man—approaching, holding hands and laughing. The Black woman shakes her head and glares at them as they pass by."

Pynke Gohaner-Lyles, the Black agency deputy director, lets out a sigh of exasperation listening to the scene. "God knows, people gave up their lives for us to have equality," she says. "You want the races to mix—you want real integration. But now you have our men crossing the line to be with White women, and I don't feel good about it."

Interracial unions between Black men and White women have always been an explosive issue in American race relations, and for Black women they've ignited some new hostilities. "I don't have a problem with it as much as I used to," says Sandra Naves, the Black prison official from Michigan, on the idea of interracial dating. "But what I do have a problem with is knowing that as attractive as I might be as a Black woman, I can be made to feel not good enough when a Black man chooses a White woman."

For Black women a large part of what they resent about White female privilege is that society affirms White women regardless of how they look—and rarely affirms Black women, no matter how beautiful. This is what makes Black women angry when they see a Black man with a White woman they consider unattractive, or see a Black man marry down in class to a White woman. Added to this is what many Blacks see as White culture's continued appropriation of Black culture. Whether it's White teenagers listening to Black rap music or White suburban housewives slapping each other a high-five, Blacks feel their art and expression get co-opted by the larger society. "It goes right back to

this: What do we have that's ours?" says Gohaner-Lyles. "Now, we don't even have our men." That is not the reality, of course, but it is too often the perception, and that becomes yet another wedge dividing us.

HEALING THE WOUNDS

What will it take to start the racial healing process? Certainly, honest talk between the two groups is a crucial first step. But before the sides can even talk, they have to become comfortable with the racial and cultural differences each brings to the table, and recognize that different doesn't have to mean divided. Blacks have to learn how to communicate with Whites without anger, and Whites have to learn to listen without denial. "We Whites are the ones who have to work on the racism issue," says Debra Abbott. "People of color have been trying to reach us for a long time. We have to understand independently what it means to be White and how that affects people of color."

Sandra Naves, recognizing that Black anger gets in the way of racial dialogue, says, "One of the things I can do is work to get rid of my hostility. When a White person asks me something, instead of getting an attitude, I can see it as an opportunity to broaden her horizons, to help her understand why I think the way I do, or dress the way I do or wear my hair in braids."

"Change always starts with one person saying something to another person," Greer Wilson says. "It doesn't happen when you get five hundred people in a town meeting. It's always going to be when Susie Jones and I have this dialogue. I may not agree with everything she says—and I don't have to. But there will be an opening up of our minds, a look at how she sees her experience and how I see mine. And there should always be respect for whatever differences we bring." •

Audrey Edwards is editor-at-large for *Essence* and a contributing writer for *Ladies' Home Journal*.

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